

# Longear Sunfish



## Scientific Name

*Lepomis megalotis*

## Family

Centrarchidae (sunfishes) in the order Perciformes (perch-like fishes)

## Description

The longear sunfish is deep-bodied, slab-sided, with a moderate-sized mouth, the upper jaw nearly reaching the front of the eye. The back and sides are blue green, speckled with yellow and emerald; the belly is yellow or orange. The side of the head is olive or light orange with sky-blue vermiculations (undulating, worm-like markings). The ear (gill) flap is elongated, black, and often bordered in white. The pectoral fin is rounded.

**Similar species:** The longear sunfish is most closely related to bluegill, green sunfish, and other sunfishes.

## Other Common Names

Pumpkinseed

Creek Perch

Sun Perch

Sunnie

## Size

Total length: 5 to 6 inches; maximum about 7 inches and 4.5 ounces.

## **Habitat & Conservation**

Avoids strong currents. Occurs in reservoirs, ponds, and in pools, inlets, and overflow waters adjacent to stream channels. Favors clear, permanent-flowing streams having sandy or rocky bottoms and aquatic vegetation. It is by far the most abundant and generally distributed sunfish over the southern half of Missouri. It is abundant in Ozark streams of all sizes except for extreme headwaters. Most active in daytime.

## **Food**

Carnivorous, feeding on insects, small crustaceans, and some small fish.

## **Status**

Nongame fish.

## **Life Cycle**

Individuals can live for 6 years. Nests in colonies, from mid-May to early or mid-August. The evenly rounded nests are nearly always fanned out over small chert gravel. Often the nests are so close together that their rims nearly touch. Courting males tilt to display their brightly colored sides to the females. After spawning, the male swims low over the nest, fanning the eggs with his fins and chasing away intruders. He stays with the nest for more than 2 weeks, until the fry have hatched and dispersed. This species typically reaches a length of about 1½ inches its first year of life.

## **Human Connections**

Despite its small size, the longear sunfish is an important panfish in Ozark streams because of its abundance and willingness to bite. It provides excellent sport when taken on light tackle.

## **Ecosystem Connections**

Like the smallmouth bass, the longear sunfish follows turtles and large suckers about as they forage over the bottom, feeding on insect larvae and small crayfish that are exposed. Longears commonly gather about the nests of smallmouth bass and other sunfishes (including their own species), rushing in to feed greedily on eggs or fry if the guardian male is momentarily distracted or frightened away.